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How does homework 'work' for young children? Children's accounts of homework in their everyday lives

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Homework is an increasing yet under-researched part of young children's everyday lives. Framed by the international agendas of starting strong and school accountability, homework in the lives of young children has been either overlooked or considered from the perspective of adults rather than from the perspective of children themselves. This paper redresses this situation by reporting on an Australian study of 120 young children, aged four to eight years, where homework emerges as a key part of their everyday lives. Children's own accounts of their everyday decision-making, using audio-taped conversations and concurrent paper-based timeline activities, show homework as accomplishing the institutional purposes of the school, while affording the children opportunities to demonstrate their competence in operating in an adult-generated education regime.

Keywords: homework; young children; early childhood; children's decision-making; children's everyday lives; early childhood education and care

Introduction

Once the province of older children, homework is now emerging as an everyday activity in the lives of young children, even before they enter the formal school system. Homework here refers to the school-prescribed tasks undertaken by children and usually under the supervision of an adult, most often a parent/parents within the home. While adults in outside-school-hours programmes and homework clubs may work with children to complete their homework tasks, the substantive focus, in this paper, is the activity of children (and adults) accomplishing the school's purposes in the setting of the home. Homework requires the home and its members, as adjuncts to the school, to orient to and comply with the school and its requirements, albeit under the rhetoric of home–school partnership (Vincent and Tomlinson

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1997; Vincent and Martin (2002)) and the performativity agenda within home–school relations (Ball 2003). Keogh (1998) refers to this practice as the school 'colonising' the home through its written and oral communication around homework, while Petrie (2008, x) refers to a process of 'schoolification' whereby the cultural and pedagogical practices of the school push down on the everyday experience of young children in prior-to-school contexts, including the context of the home. The dual trends of colonisation and schoolification fly in the face of a traditional view that young children's lives revolve around play-based activities in the home, prior to their entry to school.

Homework is not a new phenomenon. While the practice of homework was reputedly championed as early as the eleventh century by Italian teacher Roberto Nevillis, educational historians Gill and Schlossman (1996) argue that it took until the mid-twentieth century for homework to become a 'universal' phenomenon. Their historical review (Gill and Schlossman 1996, 27) shows that, as late as the 1890s in the United States, homework was resisted by progressives as 'a sin against childhood' (1996, 27), with some school districts of that era passing anti-homework legislation and some individual schools making public declarations of their opposition to homework. By the 1950s things had changed significantly – homework had become almost universal practice, seen by Gill and Schlossman (1996) as propelled by the launch of Sputnik and a concern that American students would fall behind their Russian counterparts. While homework may have been embraced (in post-war USA) as a standard practice, it was not until the 1980s that 'homework' emerged internationally as a research topic and not until relatively recently that the first major review of homework research was produced by Cooper, Robinson, and Patall (2006).

While homework was not the original core analytic focus in an Australian study of everyday decision-making involving 120 young children aged four to eight years, the study revealed a noteworthy recurrence of children's references to homework. Closer examination of the children's audio-recorded conversations and their records of daily timelines explicated homework as a key practice in the lives of the young children. This finding led us to consider children's social positioning within families (Mayall 2002) with respect to homework.

The study drew upon theoretical understandings of children's active engagement and participation in their everyday lives (Corsaro 1997; Danby and Baker 1998; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood 2011; Waksler 1991) and children's competence in accounting for their experience (Danby and Farrell 2005; Danby, Farrell, and Leiminer 2006). That children's own accounts of their experience were sought, rather than those of adults, including parents and teachers (legitimate though they may be), aligns to the notion of children as 'competent interpreters of their everyday worlds' (Danby and Farrell 2004, 35). Such understandings fly in

the face of normative developmental understandings of children as developing competence and/or of needing adult intervention in order to account for and to act upon their 'arenas of social action' (Speier, 1972, 402). The notion that children are capable agents of their own social experience sits alongside theoretical understandings of the sociology of the self (cf. Callero 2003), with self seen as a fluid, agentic and joint social accomplishment.

The accounts from the standpoint of the children (Prout 2002) as decision-makers, in their own right, were not seen as 'representative' of children as such. Nor were the accounts used for the purpose of triangulation with those of parents and teachers. Theirs were accounts in their own right, a legitimated practice that can reveal matters of which adults may be unaware or have overlooked (cf. Thorpe et al. 2004). Before examining the children's accounts, two international agendas are considered as framing young children's decision-making in relation to homework.

Two international agendas framing homework for young children: starting strong and school accountability

The current emergence of homework in the lives of young children is set within two concurrent international agendas: the 'starting strong' agenda and the 'school accountability' agenda. The starting strong agenda is exemplified in *Starting Strong II* (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2006), the OECD review of early childhood education in 20 countries. The report attests to the importance of the early years for life-chances and educational achievement and, since its publication, has driven significant investment in quality early childhood education (cf. Council of Australian Governments 2009).

Predating the OECD agenda, the starting strong agenda highlights the importance of the home, in partnership with quality early education, for positive educational outcomes. The *High Scope Perry Preschool Study* (1962–1967) (Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart 1993), for example, served as an early catalyst for early childhood research that ensued beyond the original study (cf. Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children 2012; Qi 2006; Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 2011). While there is substantial research evidence of young children's home experiences contributing to children's educational success, there has been little research into specific school-oriented tasks that young children (increasingly) undertake at home that may be contributing to their academic success. While the starting strong agenda has a substantial history, its populist adoption by governments and educational entrepreneurs may, inadvertently, mean that 'starting strong' is now being interpreted and applied in practice as 'starting early', with school-oriented activities, such as homework.

The second agenda, of school accountability, is exemplified by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (2011) (known as PISA) and its focus on homework as part of the accountability of schools to society, in promoting children's learning and the longer-term race for credentials and labour-market participation (Ball 2000). Similar to the starting strong agenda, the accountability agenda has been in play for more than a decade (cf. Ball 2000; Comber 1997; Marginson 1997) and is gaining traction, through OECD and other initiatives, in galvanising the school's capacity to afford parents, as consumers of schooling, enhanced life-chances for their children; although there may be differential chances according to social class (cf. Vincent 2012).

Large-scale international studies such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS 2007) also have focused on homework in relation to children's academic achievement. The TIMSS survey of homework practices of nine to 13 year olds in 16 OECD countries found accrued academic benefits for older children undertaking homework (in upper elementary and secondary school), and less so for younger children. With respect to TIMSS, Falch and Rønning (2011) note that school leaders, teachers and parents see homework as a valuable educational activity. The findings of a large-scale Australian study of 10,000 children, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (2010), revealed that children as young as six years engage in homework and that children in two-parent, middle-income families receive the greatest parental assistance with homework. While this study has no specific data on the number or percentage of young children undertaking homework, it is of empirical interest that homework, as an item in its own right, features in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children.

Homework for school-based success is the focus of studies in different jurisdictions (cf. Emerson and Mencken 2009; Grodner and Rupp 2011). A review of research into homework conducted by Cooper, Robinson, and Patall (2006) in the USA showed that homework was positively related to academic achievement and university entrance. Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye's (2000) study of homework, from the perspective of parents (n = 709 parents), revealed the importance of parenting styles in homework for academic outcomes. In comparison with evidence of the relative educational benefits of homework, some research has shown homework to be deleterious to children's learning and well-being. Bruce's (2007) US study, for example, showed homework to be 'busy work' that places unnecessary stress on children and impinges on family time, particularly for low-income families. Alongside empirical investigations is a plethora of populist work homework 'tips' (cf. Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001; Lacina-Gifford and Gifford 2004) and a burgeoning homework industry (see Smith 2003). Global brands such as Kumon, founded by the mathematics educator Toru Kumon, demonstrate widespread interest in learning enrichment at home or in study groups.

While Kumon programmes are prominent online (i.e. in excess of 250,000 Google entries), there appears to be little scholarly critique of Kumon as an educational phenomenon.

While much homework research focuses on academic achievement, not all studies do so. A handful of studies investigate the politics of homework in the lives of children, but not with young children *per se*. Smith's (2000) review of homework showed that children are constructed as passive recipients, rather than active political agents of homework. Hutchison (2011) used visual ethnography with 11-year-old to 13-year-old children in Australia, Denmark and the United Kingdom to explore the inclusionary and exclusionary aspects of homework in their lives. Children's video diaries and audio-recorded conversations showed children's agency to undertake homework, both in middle-class families with cultural capital and in ethnic minority families where familial capital was complemented by community resources. Children capturing, in video diaries, their homework space, made exclusionary structural inequality visible.

Studying family life in Sweden, Italy and the USA, Forsberg (2007) examined parent–child negotiations around homework in Swedish families using video-recordings of everyday parent–child interactions, activity logs and parent surveys and interviews. Findings revealed parental regulation of children's time and the physically non-present, but socially present, teacher. A related study, examining parent–child talk about homework in American and Swedish dual-earner families, found an inherent tension between parent and child responsibilities for homework, with each holding different expectations of parental involvement in homework where, for example, the child sought to elicit answers from her mother, while her mother issued a command to the child to tell *her* the answer (Wingard and Forsberg 2009).

An earlier study by Wingard (2006) found homework to be an interactional achievement between the child and the parents, whereby the child is socialised into the practices of work and time management. These studies provide in-depth evidence of homework in the lives of typically older children, using ethnographic (cf. Hutchison 2011) and ethnomethodological (cf. Wingard 2006) approaches. Despite this work and large-scale work conducted under the auspices of the OECD and other peak bodies, there remains little empirical evidence of homework in the lives of young children, and even less from the standpoint of young children themselves. By and large, studies around young children and homework studies polarise around the notions that: young children's early learning experience and their home learning environment are important influences on their later educational outcomes (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001); and homework is a negative 'busy' activity that impinges on family time (Lacina-Gifford and Gifford 2004) and places unnecessary stress on children (Bruce 2007).

Interest in children's learning, against the backcloth of the starting strong and accountability agendas, is occasioning a sharpened focus on young

children's everyday lives, both at home and at school, with homework being a site for convergence of the two agendas. The focus on young children's lives in home and school contexts gave rise to an Australian study of the lived experiences of 120 young children aged four to eight years, from the standpoint of the children themselves. The study examined children's everyday decision-making in home and school contexts (Danby and Farrell 2004, 2005; Danby, Farrell, and Leiminer 2006). Somewhat surprisingly, the study revealed that young children focused on homework in their lives, such that it prompted the question: how does homework 'work' for young children in the context of their everyday lives? This paper probes this question by examining the evidence provided by the children themselves.

The study: young children accounting for homework in their everyday lives

Design

Conducted in Australia with 120 young children aged four to eight years, the study generated children's own accounts of decision-making in their everyday lives. Rather than seeking verifiable reports of children's experiences, children generated their own *in situ* accounts of their experience; a research interview practice that Baker (2004, 169) describes as 'the work of accounting' for experience rather than one of responding to the interviewer *per se* (cf. Silverman (2001).

Children were invited to participate with the researcher in an audio-recorded conversation about their daily activities and routines and were invited to participate in a concurrent paper-based timeline activity about their everyday decision-making. Children were invited to provide their voluntary informed consent to participate in the study and, in line with the standard ethical protocols, were assigned pseudonyms. Researchers asked the children: when do you get to make decisions during the day? When do others make decisions for you? When is it OK for others to make decisions for you? In constructing a timeline of their day, children identified when and where they made decisions about matters affecting them every day.

Data included 120 interviews, each of approximately 30 minutes duration (approximately 60 hours of audio recorded data), and 100 timelines. These activities were undertaken in early childhood settings, schools and after-school programmes. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and collated with corresponding timelines. A noteworthy proportion of the children in the sample, 21% of the sample (26 children) made reference to homework, thus inviting further investigation of homework in their everyday lives. The gender profile showed 14 females and 12 males referring to homework, spread across the five to eight age range; and no younger children in prior-to-school settings (such as childcare and kindergarten) making reference to homework. The sample spanned a range of communities: an

inner-city multicultural community, an outer metropolitan area with a high proportion of Indigenous families, and a low-socio-economic area close to a prison.

Analysis

Thematic analysis (cf. Denzin and Lincoln 2011) was used to achieve the 'analytic purpose' (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012, 7) of identifying the themes or categories that emerged from the children's own accounts of everyday activities in their lives. Drawing upon the framework for thematic analysis outlined by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012), the investigation of homework was largely exploratory (or content oriented) rather than confirmatory (or hypothesis oriented). Rather than seeking to test hypotheses about homework in children's lives or searching for the occurrence of homework in their lives, the study opened up opportunities for children to provide accounts of their everyday lives, accounts that may or may not have included references to homework. In this instance, homework emerged from within the data and was considered in the situated contexts of the children's everyday decision-making.

Audio-recorded conversations were transcribed verbatim and, prior to thematic analysis, the transcription conventions and notations of a professional, international transcription service were used. Analysis involved reading and re-reading the transcript and timeline data, and looking for key words, trends or themes. In relation to the analytic processes used, 'thematic analysis moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases to focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes' (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012, 10).

Examination of the accounts of three children – Tyron, Jason and Kegan – is prefaced by inclusion of a sample of excerpts from 14 other children who made reference to homework in their research conversations. A criterion used in the selection of the three children was their reference to homework in both their audio-recorded conversations and timeline drawings. Evidence from the three children is not seen as representative of the broader sample of children in the study nor representative of children, more broadly. Nor does the paper seek, *a priori*, to draw upon the discourses of gender, social class, or academic performance of the children and their school in dealing with children's references to homework. Rather, it presents children's accounts as emblematic of the recurring themes that were revealed in analysis.

Emerging evidence of homework in children's accounts of their everyday lives

Homework is shown in the following sample of 14 excerpts as a school requirement, a task or series of tasks 'given' by the teacher to the child to

complete at home. These excerpts made evident homework as a 'given' in their daily lives, as seemingly part and parcel of their lives, requiring completion before other home-oriented activities such as playing outside or watching television could be undertaken. In most instances the accounts show children complying with the parent-enforced homework requirement of the school and, upon its completion, the child being able to undertake other activities:

> Homework is really something that you have to do for school to learn. Mainly they give you, sometimes they give you easy sums. I don't do homework on Tuesday, but every other day I do homework first, and then I go and do whatever I want. So I have to do something I have to do first and then I ask my dad or my mum if I can do something and they say, 'Yes, if you've done all your homework'. And so I do that and then when it's dinnertime it's not free time. (Mike)

> I finish my homework and then I go to the park. (Sally)

> I have to do my homework for a bit and I'm allowed to play the computer or play in the park. (Amos)

> I always have to do my homework or I'll get into trouble. (Johann)

> After Play School we have to, me and Jules, have to do our homework. She's nine. She does her homework before and through Play School. She stops and watches a bit of TV and keeps on doing her homework. Me and Jules both do homework. (Katie)

> In the afternoons, Dad tells me 'Have you done your homework?' Sometimes I say yes or no. He wants to sleep then. (Nikki)

> I've got to do my homework on Mondays. I ask my mum if I can ride my bike. When I've got a book to read then she says 'No you can't.' (Mark)

Sari marked on her timeline and discussed in her conversation a time during the day when she does not get to decide what she wants to do in her day:

> Well, pretty much when, like doing my homework, mum and dad say, 'Go do your homework today because you haven't done any yet.' … after school I do music practice or homework. I have two instruments, clarinet and violin. And so I can do violin depending on what day it is or clarinet. But I can do both if I want. Yea. But if I've had a big day that day, like if we have sports day, I don't have to do it. And on Fridays I don't have practice or homework. (Sari)

In only one instance was there mention of homework as a group experience:

> What happens is on Mondays we have homework group and we all get together at houses and all the houses get a turn and sometimes we do like Hungry Jacks and McDonalds and stuff … the mums go together and then decide. (Erica)

There was no evidence, across the entire corpus of homework data, of children actively resisting homework, although there was one instance of Violet having a say about the times she does homework (before Friday) and of Lilly being able to play in the pool before doing homework:

> I get to choose what times I do my homework before Friday. (Violet)

> After we play in the pool together, we go upstairs and do our homework … sometimes I like that, sometimes I think oh man. (Lilly)

While completion of homework was the focus of most of the children, non-completion of homework was reported by Jenny as having notable consequences at school:

> If people don't do their homework they have to get up on the board and then they have to do it. (Jenny)

At one school, children reported undertaking additional learning activities, such as Kumon, at home:

> It's like what-its-name, like homework … it's separate. You can do maths of English in this and there's levels from A to Q, I think. But it stops at L and goes to Q and Q is like university stuff. I got to choose if I wanted to do Kumon or not and I have to do it at four o'clock on regular days … it gives me an hour after I get home and it doesn't … it take me sometimes thirty minutes. (Zen)

Zen's younger sister, Tara, also made reference to homework. When asked who sets the homework, Tara replied: 'No one. Well I do, it's Kumon homework'. Recounting how she came to be doing Kumon, Tara commented:

> Well, my friends, my friend does it and she showed my mum and my mum liked it so we tried it out. And not I'm up to C level. Like you go, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H … just like that. It just keeps going on really, on and on and on. (Tara)

In only one case, Valerie referred to completing homework 'at school', where she reported that homework was done when she arrived at school, before the bells rang.

These excerpts attest to children undertaking homework tasks in their everyday lives. While the intended focus of the interview and timeline activities was children's decision-making, there was little evidence of children making decisions about whether to actually do or not do homework. Rather, homework was shown as largely non-negotiable, with other activities contingent upon its completion.

The wide-angled snapshot of homework captured in the previous excerpts points to the need to illuminate the data by examining more closely the accounts of three particular children. This examination reveals three key aspects of homework in their lives. First, homework is an adult-generated, institutional practice to which children comply (cf. Smith 2000). A second related aspect concerns children's rights; that is, children's rights being at odds with those of the adult/adults (Alderson 2002). Third, homework is a technical, instrumental practice of the school, enacted in the home, with its own suite of technical tools, strategies and resources (cf. Hutchison 2011). These three aspects are discussed now, with evidence drawn from the actual conversations and timelines of the three children.

Case 1: Tyson. Homework is an institutional practice to which children comply

Homework, as an institutional practice, is made visible in the case of Tyron in Year Two. In both his conversation and timeline drawing, homework can be seen as an adult-generated school practice to which he complies. Fourteen minutes into his 19-minute conversation, Tyron recounts the end of the school day marked by the bell ringing at three o'clock, followed by his going home in his mother's car:

01	Researcher:	And what happens when you get home?
02	Tyron:	Work.
03	Researcher:	More work? That's a lot of work in a day isn't it? So what sort of
04		work do you do when you get home?
05	Tyron:	Lots of homework, extra homework.
06	Researcher:	Okay, well would you like to draw a picture of you doing
07		homework?
08	Tyron:	That is homework, meant for school and homework.
09	Researcher:	Do you ever do or say anything to try and not do your homework
10		when your mum says?
11	Tyron:	Well homework nearly takes three hours with me because I have
12		to do lots and by the time of the three hours it's dinnertime.

Tyron makes mention of work, school and homework in his conversation and encodes in his timeline, in conventional script, 'skhuw' for 'school' (Figure 1). 'Work' (line 2), 'lots of homework' (line 5) and 'extra homework' (line 5) are mentioned as is the duration of homework, 'nearly takes three hours with me' (line 11). Earlier in the conversation Tyron describes his school day, after lunch: 'Go back inside. Just do work, work'. Work, in Tyron's conversation, is not confined to school – it continues at home.

Tyron can be seen here to comply with the work requirements of the school; that is, work set by the school and undertaken at home. His mother brings him home, homework is undertaken and it is then time for dinner.

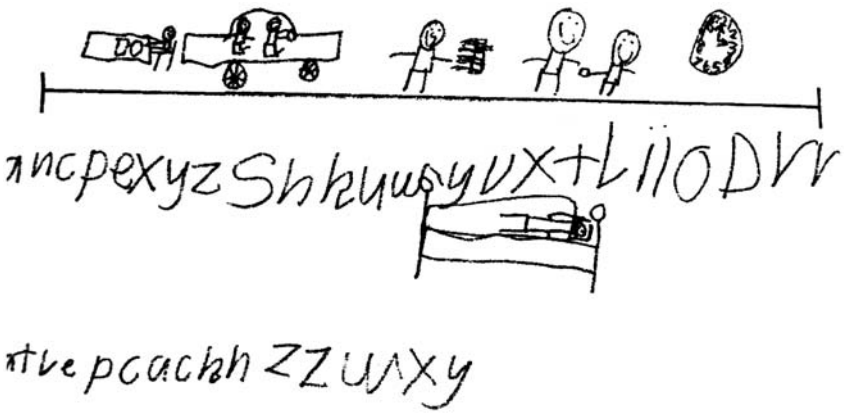

Figure 1. Tyron's timeline drawing.

Despite these activities, there is no evidence of her actually participating with Tyron in homework. Is his mother serving as a passive agent of the school, collecting him from the locale of the institution and providing the context in which homework is undertaken, but not engaging actively with him to complete the school-set task? Conversely, is the teacher an active agent of the school, not present in the home, but engaging with the child vicariously through homework? Forsberg (2007, 231) found homework in Swedish families to be a site of the 'the physically non-present but socially present teacher … Homework not only concerns parental regulation of children, but also the school's regulation of family life.'

Tyron's account aligns with the research of Forsberg (2007) and Hutchison (2011) who both highlight the dominant role of homework in bringing the school into the home context. Forsberg (2007) found that homework is, indeed, taken for granted by children and parents alike; children complying with the adult requirement for homework and parents accepting their supervisory role in relation to homework. Tyron may be orienting to and complying with the institutional agenda for school work being done at home. He and his mother may be operating with homework as a taken-for-granted part of their institutionalised lives.

Hutchison (2011) argues that homework is part of a wider educational discourse in western liberal democratic societies such as Australia, Britain and Scandinavia, purported to promote quality learning in children's lives.

AQ7 Work by Corno (2000) and Warton (2001) shows that children complete homework to please adults and to avoid punishment. While there is no evidence in Tyron's conversation or timeline of his seeking to please adults or to avoid punishment, there is tacit acceptance of teacher authority in his everyday life; with respect to the nature and magnitude of the work to be undertaken and with respect to the temporal aspect of when it is undertaken; that is, after school and before dinnertime. Tyron, in this respect, appears to

take on what Smith (2000, 320) describes as an instrumental view of homework', wherein homework is a necessity to be 'fitted in' around other aspects of daily life.

For Tyron's mother, the onus is on her to ensure the conditions under which homework can be completed and within a defined time period. Her responsibility is to align with the school agenda, ensuring that Tyron is brought home when the bell rings at three o'clock so that he can undertake homework prior to dinnertime. Wingard and Forsberg (2009) note that educational policy mandates that parents be enlisted in a range of tasks that denote their participation in their child's education, one way being through their supervision of homework, although in Tyron's case there is no mention of his mother supervising his homework. Parents become 'taskmasters' (Wingard and Forsberg 2009, 1591–1592) as they manage homework tasks and orient to homework as their prime responsibility, 'a process whereby they become 'pedagogogicialized as surrogate teachers at home' (2009, xxx), with children aligning their conduct to adult expectations and norms.

Case 2: Jason. Homework reveals children's rights at odds with those of adults

Homework is seen in the case of Jason as revealing children's rights at odds with, or in non-alignment to, those of the adult/adults. Engaging in a 49-minute conversation (the longest in the homework sample), Jason worked on his timeline (in many instances) simultaneous to speaking about it. Early in the conversation, he noted: 'I really like talking to people, because at home I'm a chatterbox … I draw pictures of what I do or write words'. He commented on his timeline drawing: 'OK I'll do my desk. My desk has only two legs. And here's my book and here's my chair at my desk and here's me' (Figure 2).

Twenty minutes into his conversation, he mentioned 'homework time' (line 1), following the researcher's attempt to guide the conversation according to the chronology of the day:

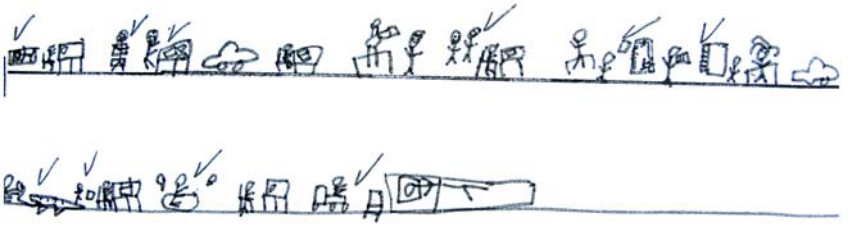

Figure 2. Jason's timeline drawing.

01	Researcher:	Homework time. Who decides you do homework?
02	Jason:	The teacher makes the homework and Mum lets me do the homework. If
03		I don't I'll have to skip a day of homework and I have to do two lots of
04		homework the next day.
05	Researcher:	Who decides you have to do that?
06	Jason:	My mum. So draw a picture of me doing my homework.
07		Here's the bench.
08	Researcher:	Do you ever try and not do your homework?
09	Jason	No, I never try, because I know I want to be the best in the class.

Jason's statement 'The teacher makes the homework and Mum lets me do the homework' (line 2) points to the decision-making rights of the adult rather than to those of Jason, albeit in relation to activities set by the teacher and permitted by the parent. Waksler (1991) points out that notions of children lacking power and knowledge and, therefore, needing to rely on adult directives to operate in their everyday lives, are common place and work to discount the competency of the children in managing their everyday lives. Alderson (2002), in turn, draws upon notions of children's citizenship rights from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, rights that translate to opportunities for decision-making in everyday contexts such as schools. More than a decade ago Tomasevski (1999, 25), the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, called for schools to afford children citizenship rights and to 'show how children are citizens rather than citizens-to-be'. The account of Jason invites the question of whether there have been gains in children's rights to decision-making, since Tomasevski's earlier call for children's citizenship rights.

And what of the rights of adults, of parent and teacher in the area of homework? Keogh's (1998) Australian study revealed teacher rights and parent rights being at odds, with teachers being privy to particular resources (such as student work folders and mark books) that were 'closed' to parents. While Jason's account is not concerned with a juxtaposition of teacher and parent rights, homework can be seen as a prime site for the school imposing its practices on the home via homework tasks and resources. In Jason's conversation, 'the teacher makes the homework and Mum lets me do the homework' (line 2), his teacher makes or designs the homework and his mother fulfils the teacher-set requirement. Is the assignment of responsibility from the teacher to the mother evidence of teacher and mother having differing rights, whereby the teacher prescribes the homework and the mother acts upon the teacher's prescription in a utilitarian way?

Case 3: Kegan. Homework is a set of instrumental, technical practices of the school enacted in the home

Related to the enactment of homework as a school-determined and parent-monitored set of practices, it might be possible to consider that homework

is a set of instrumental technical practices performed by children, in order to advance the purposes of the school. Characteristically, homework is instrumental in that it serves as an instrument by which the purposes of the school are accomplished. It is technical in that it requires the rehearsal and completion of technical tasks (focused on decoding and encoding within and across learning areas), using technical language (such as homework instructions) and technical tools (such as homework books).

Kegan shows that homework has its own technical tools (e.g. homework) and associated technical practices. In a 29-minute conversation, Kegan recounts what happens when he gets to school in the morning:

01	Researcher:	What do you do when you get there?
02	Kegan:	Sometimes I go in the classroom and play. The bells goes, so I have to get my tools our and get my homework book out.

Kegan's homework book, as a technical tool, is a vehicle for communication between home and school. It has a special designation as a homework book, a necessary means by which homework requirements are recorded, by which homework is evidenced and verified, and by which homework is confirmed and communicated as being completed. Not only does it go home, it returns from home to school for school-based activities, for further inscription and instruction that, in turn, are subject to actioning at home.

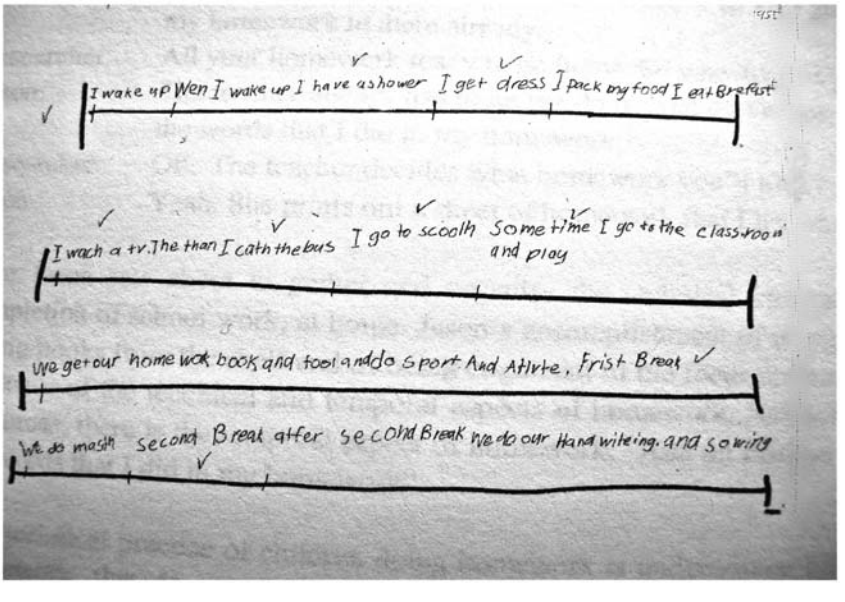

Figure 3. Kegan's timeline drawing.

The homework book and its two-way mobility between school and home reveal the versatility, workability and 'instrumentality' of homework (cf. Smith 2000) as a task or tasks that are made to work in the daily lives of children.

Jason, as well as Kegan, shows homework tasks being prepared at school, for enactment at home. For Jason, homework involves technical tools (such as reading books) and an anticipated routine of practice, in preparation for a Friday spelling test (Figure 3):

01	Jason:	Well, I get ready with my stuff. On Mondays I have to get
02		my reading books and my homework to take home.
03	Researcher:	So you pack away to go home?
0405	Jason:	Yeah, pack away all the stuff that I have to keep at home all week, then on Friday I have to bring it back. [Jason draws a picture of himself on the timeline.]
06		OK. Here's me and here's me holding my homework folder.
07		And here's the big shelf of books that I can read, that the
08		whole class can read. And I pick out some of them and I put
09		them in there. I've also got my sight words and my
10		homework in there already.
11	Researcher:	All your homework ready to go home. So who decides you'll
12		do that?
13	Jason:	The teacher always has to let me do it. And on Fridays I get a
14		spelling test of the words that I did in my homework.
15	Researcher:	OK. The teacher decides what homework you'll have?
16	Jason	Yeah. She prints out a sheet of homework that I have to do.

Here Jason sets about to gather and organise the technical tools required for successful completion of school work, at home. Jason's accomplishment of managing his homework, of taking books from the shelf and of being cognisant of the focus and routine of homework are evidence of the technical and temporal aspects of homework. Not only are there homework resources, there is the temporal aspect of homework 'and on Fridays I get a spelling test of the words that I did in my homework' (lines 13 and 14).

The technical practice of children doing homework is underwritten by parent support of the homework that is anticipated by the teacher. In this respect, homework is a joint accomplishment although, in the case of Jason, the parent's role appears to be limited to that of monitor rather than supervisor. In so far as the parent provides the conditions under which homework is undertaken, she acts as an agent of the school and ensures that the child complies with its requirements in the dual spaces of home and school. In other words, the work of the parent is as agent of the school and ally of the teacher; and home becomes an annex of the school, providing the time and space for schoolwork to be accomplished. Is the parent role, like that of the child, instrumental? Is the parent drafted by the teacher/school into supervision of homework, a role assigned by their consumption of the market-driven schooling and its alleged benefits?

Conclusion

Homework involves a complex set of technical and communicative practices, shown in many ways to serve to the institutional purposes of the school. Central to these purposes is the work of parents as:

> primary 'consumers' of education and their co-option as administrators and supervisors of homework regimes, revealing a process of elision by which children's interests can be assimilated into those of their parents. The aspirations and understandings of parents can be engaged in the pursuit of wider political ends. (Smith 2000, 321)

In critiquing childhood, agency and education reform in the period up to the late 1990s, Wyness (1999, 357) argued that adults are the 'influential agents' whereby parents are consumers of education, for or on behalf of their child/children.

Despite the rhetoric around parent involvement in homework, the children's accounts presented here reveal little evidence of input from parents, or of parents being influential in their educative role in homework. It may well be that the conceptual and methodological approach taken in the study afforded opportunities by which children demonstrate that their worlds are 'phenomenological distinct from those of adults' (Boyden 1997, 224). By inviting children's own accounts of their everyday lives, rather than relying on adult accounts of children's lives, the study makes a conceptual and methodological contribution to the field of parent involvement in homework. It shows children taking carriage of their homework, albeit with some evidence of ancillary roles played by parents.

Analysis of the children's accounts shows the children describing themselves as competent in managing homework in their everyday lives, albeit within a school–home regime framed by the school and monitored in the home. Rather than constructing children as passive recipients of education, the accounts of children presented here show their capacity to incorporate homework routines into their everyday lives, so as to demonstrate their competence as actors in an adult-generated education regime. Their performance as actors is set within school–home relations that typify the schoolification (Petrie 2008) of their everyday lives.

The finding from this study that homework features in the accounts of children in school settings but does not feature in the accounts of younger children in prior-to-school settings (such as childcare and kindergarten) gives further weight to the notion that homework is, indeed, a school-oriented phenomenon, and not yet a phenomenon of note in prior-to-school contexts. The absence of evidence for younger children accounting for homework invites further research around the claim that homework is an increasingly ubiquitous part of younger children's lives. It raises questions about before-school contexts: do before-school contexts quarantine children

from homework? Do teachers hold to pedagogical practices that preclude homework? Do parents seek other activities (that may not be labelled as 'homework') for their children? Such questions in relation to before-school settings serve to challenge the starting strong and accountability agendas introduced at the beginning of this article.

While manifestations of the two agendas of starting strong and accountability may be different in school and before-school settings, the agendas talk to the overall purpose of schooling and of the role of homework in achieving its purposes. If children are to have a strong start in life, and if accountability is to go beyond schools and school systems merely accounting for student performance on standardised measures, there needs to be a focus on children's everyday experiences, in home and school contexts, as sites for decision-making on matters that affect them.

In considering the affordances of homework for young children, we suggest that further studies of young children's experiences of homework investigate the role of homework in the learning lives of children, the introduction of homework to younger children, and a comprehensive study of homework practices that allow for children's decision-making. Further considerations include the roles of parents and teachers in promoting children's learning, both in the context of school and of home. Such considerations point to the affordances of opportunities, such as those in this study, for children to participate in and account for their everyday experiences, particularly those involving homework in the dual contexts of home and school.

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